English Should Be Our Official Language

October 19, 1995 by Phyllis Schlafly

How do we make Americans out of people who come here from so many other continents and cultures?

Surely the best, quickest, most obvious, and most efficient way is to teach them to speak English. The English language is the admission ticket to our social, political and economic mainstream. Without it, immigrants will be forever relegated to menial jobs.

The establishment media expressed shock when presidential candidate Bob Dole joined the movement to make English our official language, but this issue has been steadily building for years. Twenty-one states have already made English their official language. In Florida, the official English proposition passed by 84 percent, in California by 73 percent and in Colorado by 61 percent.

The movement to legislate English as our official language has nothing to do with what language you speak in your home, church, club, or business, or what foreign languages you may care to learn. It has to do only with what language is promoted and paid for by the government.

Few Americans realize that current federal law requires ballots to be printed in non-English languages if just 5 percent of the population in a voting jurisdiction, or ten thousand people, speak a language other than English. In Los Angeles, ballots printed in Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Tagalog and Korean cost the taxpayers $300,000 in one recent election.

Why are we doing this? A naturalized citizen must "demonstrate an understanding of the English language, including the ability to read, write, and speak words in ordinary usage in the English language." Only citizens can vote, so there is no reasonable excuse for non-English ballots.

In a number of reported cases, poor translations have made it impossible for someone using the non-English ballot to cast an informed vote. The New York Times even reported one 1993 case where a Chinese ballot printed the character for "no" as a translation of "yes."

A bureaucratic boondoggle called "bilingual education" has kept immigrant children segregated from English-speaking teachers and children, and consigned to a foreign-language ghetto where they are taught all subjects in their native tongue. It's a sort of language apartheid, leading to the emergence of a permanent, non- English speaking subculture within America.

Since 1974, federal regulations have required public school instructors to be proficient in the foreign language they teach, but not that they speak English fluently. Now we have a powerful lobby trying to maintain its jobs by keeping children in foreign language classes year after year.

Federal regulations also decree that a school can lose its funding if it fails to "instruct," "maintain," and "develop" in the student's native tongue, but there is no corresponding penalty for failing to teach English. Students can and do graduate from public high school without ever learning English.

Before 1974, millions of non-English speaking immigrants learned English by the immersion method: the adults put their children in public schools where only English was spoken, the children learned English rapidly, and they went home and taught English to their parents. This system worked just fine until Federal busybodies, with more money than they knew how to spend, decided to experiment on vulnerable immigrant children whose parents didn't know how to fight the system.

Twenty years later, there's still no proof that these programs are successful in bringing immigrant children into the English- speaking mainstream of our nation. Christine Russell, professor of English at Boston University, evaluated 79 bilingual programs and found none was any better than just immersing children in English.

The bilingual education lobby now asserts that evidence of effectiveness is not important because the decision of how to teach immigrant children is a "cultural" not a pedagogical issue. Some admit openly that the purpose of bilingual education is not assimilation, but to make foreign language and culture an integral part of American society.

Polls have found that more that three-fourths of all Americans believe that English should be the official language of government and that anyone who wants to live in this country should learn English. A survey of immigrant parents done for the Department of Education found that 78 percent of Mexican Americans and 83 percent of Cuban Americans thought that schools should not teach immigrant or minority children in a foreign language instead of English.

We can't blame the Supreme Court for bilingual education; the 1974 Lau v. Nichols decision simply left it up to the schools to devise a remedy to deal with non-English speaking students. Congress is free to repeal laws requiring non-English ballots and bilingual education, and a bill introduced by Rep. Toby Roth (R-WI) would do just that.

Of course, English should be our official language. The language of the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution is fundamental to our national identity. Without it, we will cease to be one nation.